

LACDMH PRESENTS 2013 AI/AN MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE
By Marc Borkheim, Ph.D., Cultural Competency Unit & Nina Tayyib, Psy.D.,
M.P.H., American Indian/Alaska Native UREP Liaison



The American Indian/Alaska Native Mental Health Conference 2013 "Integrating Services to Heal Our Generations" was held on Wednesday, November 20 at the California Endowment.

This year's conference highlighted how the integration of mental health services, substance abuse services, physical health services and traditional spiritual & cultural practices improve mental health outcomes for the American Indian/Alaska Native community. American Indian/Alaska Native researchers, clinicians, tribal chiefs, community leaders, veterans and youth representing local and national tribes presented an array of information throughout the day's activities. Harold Freeland, Navajo, designed the artwork for the conference that reflected the theme of the integration.

The beauty and majesty of the American Indian/Alaska Native way of life was caught in glimpses throughout the conference. The deep reverence for life, nature, self and family was displayed in the handmade gourds that were centerpieces.



Traditional blessings before various activities were provided and were deeply absorbed by conference participants. This included a blessing by Chief Rudy Ortega, Jr., of the

Fernandeño Tataviam tribe, and Benjamin Hale of the Navajo tribe, and Walter Ahhaitty of the Comanche, Kiowa and Cherokee tribes. The American Indian/Alaska Native community's pure and simple joy encountering nature was expressed in traditional singing and drumming groups. This included the White Rose Singers from Sherman Indian High School, which is an American Indian/Alaska Native Boarding School, and the Friends of American Indian Changing Spirits drumming group.



American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) philosophies, worldviews and struggles were shared in the six workshops offered during morning and afternoon sessions. Workshops focused on various populations, including AI/AN Veterans, AI/AN Youth, and the AI/AN Two-Spirit/LGBT community. One session highlighted an LACDMH Innovations program, the Community-Designed Integrated Service Management Model (ISM), specific to the AI/AN community which is being implemented and evaluated. As well, there was an informational session on Health Care Reform, specific to the AI/AN community.

The two plenary speakers of the conference were Bonnie M. Duran, Dr.P.H, of the Opelousas and Coshatta tribes, and David A. Patterson (Adelv Unegy Waya), Ph.D., of the Cherokee tribe. They provided macroscopic perspectives on forces, both past and present, circumscribing and limiting the American Indian/Alaska Native way of life and existence.

Dr. Duran is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Services, University of Washington School of Public Health and is also the Director of the Center for Indigenous Health Research at the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute.

She presented on the rationale for a wellness resiliency approach to treatment interventions with the AI/AN community as well as some potential individual and community level interventions that emphasize a culture-centered approach. She highlighted how colonial world views, entrenched in prototypical standards of progress and morality serving the needs of the holders of social power, discarded American Indian/Alaska Native worldviews and life. Dr. Duran argued that unless research is community engaged, intent on understanding and integrating indigenous worldviews in

whatever scientific methods are used, the colonial bias will prevail and obviate indigenous experience.



Dr. Patterson, from the Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, has over 15 years of providing clinical, addiction-related services. He shared his own personal and professional experiences with the mental health and substance abuse field as well as best practices in the integration of culture to achieve wellness.

He used his personal experience to show how present institutions, such as education and psychiatry, are unable to adequately understand and represent the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native youth. For example, when university faculty asked him why American Indian/Alaska Natives had such a high dropout rate at their university, he explained to them that it was the university that had failed in educating American Indian/Alaska Native students – not the other way around. Dr. Patterson described how despite being labeled as learning disabled and mentally retarded, and being advised to hang on to his job as a trash collector, he was able to complete a doctorate and become a faculty member at major universities.



Daniel Dickerson D.O., M.P.H., of the Inupiaq tribe, was honored at the conference for his contributions to the American Indian/Alaska Native community. Dr. Dickerson is a

double board-certified psychiatrist and addiction psychiatrist and is an Assistant Research Psychiatrist at U.C.L.A., Integrated Substance Abuse Programs (ISAP). He also provides psychiatric and substance abuse treatment services at United American Indian Involvement (UAI) in Los Angeles. Dr. Dickerson focuses his research on substance abuse and HIV among American Indians/Alaska Natives and on the development of culturally relevant substance abuse treatments for American Indians/Alaska Natives.

He was presented with a traditional drum, carved by an Alaska Native wood carver/artist, which was donated by Paula Starr, Executive Director of Southern California Indian Center.

This event was funded by MHSA and co-presented by the American Indian/Alaska Native Under-Represented Ethnic Populations (UREP) Subcommittee, LACDMH and the Los Angeles County Mental Health Commission. The present AI/AN UREP Co-Chairs are Carrie A. Johnson, Ph.D., of the Dakota Sioux tribe (*in photo below, middle*) and Melanie Cain, Ph.D., of the Santa Clara Pueblo and Jicarilla Apache tribes (*in photo below, left*). A special thanks to Glenda Ahhaitty of the Cherokee tribe for her work with this conference and the AI/AN community at large.

